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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 000161

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP AND PRM  
CDR USPACOM FOR FPA

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TAGS: [PREF](#) [BG](#) [BM](#)

SUBJECT: UNHCR TO CLOSE IN BANGLADESH

REF: DHAKA 190

Classified By: COM Carmen Martinez, Reason: 1.5 (d).

11. (C) Summary: UNHCR tells us it plans to close down its refugee operations in Bangladesh at the end of 2003. In 2004, it will look at the possibility of closing its operations in Burma's northern Rakhine State. Whatever the merits of the decision in Bangladesh, in Burma, premature closure of UNHCR's operations will raise the risks of a new refugee crisis. End Summary.

12. (C) Hitoshi Mise, the Deputy Director for UNHCR's Asia Division told diplomats on February 4 that UNHCR would end support for refugee repatriation from Bangladesh on June 30, 2003 and close down UNHCR's operations in Bangladesh entirely at the end of 2003. It would review UNHCR's operations in Burma in 2004 and make a decision then whether to close there as well, probably at the end of 2004.

13. (C) Mise said that this decision had been coming for some time. UNHCR's operations in Bangladesh and Burma were among the most UNHCR's protracted. Moreover, most refugees have already been repatriated. Of the 250,000 refugees that left Burma for Bangladesh in the early 1990s, 230,000 have already returned. Only 22,000 remain in Bangladesh and while approximately 1,000 were still returning each year, that was less than annual camp births and not enough to reduce the refugee population. Of the remaining refugees, only about 7,000 had been cleared by Burma for repatriation, but, even among those, not all were ready to return. Some had protection problems; others had a variety of family or economic reasons for refusing repatriation.

14. (C) In any case, UNHCR had tried to work out arrangements to allow the remaining refugees to establish a new "self-sustaining capacity" in Bangladesh, pending repatriation to Burma. They had presented this plan to Bangladesh's Foreign Secretary in January, but, since the plan involved refugees working within the local economy, the Foreign Secretary rejected the program as a cover for local resettlement of the refugees. This left UNHCR with few options, according to Mise. Hence the decision to close the camps.

15. (C) Mise emphasized that at least the June 30 deadline was not hard and fast. If refugees wanted to return to Burma after that date, UNHCR would most likely provide some assistance. It had also opened a dialogue with other UN agencies to ensure there was support for the refugees who remained behind in Bangladesh after December 31, 2003.

16. (C) Mise also said that he believed that the Government of Bangladesh was looking for a way to put the refugee problem behind them. Burmese contacts had told him that the Bangladeshis had scarcely raised the refugee issue during Than Shwe's December visit. Bangladesh's State Minister for Foreign Affairs had also told him unofficially that Bangladesh could not grant the remaining refugees asylum, for fear of becoming a target country for other refugees, but was looking for another way out -- "a discreet solution to the problem." In that context, UNHCR's approach, by taking the burden of decision off the Bangladeshis, could work.

Comment

17. (C) UNHCR may be right in this case. We have heard the same comments from Burmese sources about fading Bangladesh government interest in the refugee question. Nevertheless, the BDG does need a way out and UNHCR, by acting unilaterally, may allow the BDG to avoid responsibility for the decision while still accepting the fait accompli.

18. (C) That said, there may be problems. According to UNHCR's Resident Representative in Rangoon, there are probably 3,000 to 5,000 refugees still in camps in Bangladesh that have legitimate protection problems and a legitimate fear of political persecution, should they return to Burma. What happens to those individuals if they find themselves unable to support themselves in Bangladesh? Secondly, the entire Rohingya Muslim community in Northern Rakhine State remains under intense military, political, and social pressure. UNHCR, through its protection services, has been

able to deflect some of these pressures. However, there is really no one to replace UNHCR, if it pulls out. Efforts to establish development programs in northern Rakhine State under the auspices of other UN agencies (e.g., through the Basic Needs Assessment Program in 2000 and 2001) have made little progress. More importantly, however, UNHCR is the only UN agency that has maintained a consistent focus on human rights in its operations. All others have shied from the issue. Its exit, consequently, may leave the Rohingya Muslim population unprotected and raise the risks of a new exodus. That does not necessarily have to be the result, but Post strongly suggests the USG discuss with the United Nations and other interested parties alternate protection arrangements that could substitute for UNHCR's operations in northern Rakhine State. End Comment.

19. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Dhaka.  
Martinez